Ashkenazi Jews Must Stop Identifying As White/European

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2 As with past anti-Semitic paroxysms, it has infiltrated the most pressing and relevant conversations of our day, transforming them from the inside out and deftly harnessing their power to cast us as the arch-villains once more.

3 That’s why this conversation is super important.

4 White Europeans have dominated the world over the past 500 years through colonialism, conquest, slavery, and genocide of indigenous populations.

5 They may hate being guilt tripped over the actions of their past ancestors, but history is history. It cannot be changed and it cannot be willed or wished away.

6 Most white people today may not be colonizers themselves, but they still benefit from the power structures put in place by their ancestors.

7 The effects of these structures and the crimes that created them continue to be felt by those historically and presently victimized by them – including the Jews.

8 European civilization did a lot of good for the world by introducing industry, technology, modernity, and enlightenment, but it also slaughtered millions, introduced new diseases to races that had no immunity, and wiped out countless indigenous cultures throughout the world.

9 For Ashkenazi Jews (and also Sephardi Jews, but that’s another topic), it was European colonialism that destroyed our Second Temple, robbed us of our homeland, renamed it so that it bore the names of our worst enemies, carried our ancestors to Europe on slave ships, and forced us into a state of exile for nearly 2000 years.

10 Our people were persecuted, tormented, slaughtered, and kept in a state of virtual captivity on the European continent for generations, and were driven to the point of near extinction less than 100 years ago – in our grandparents’ lifetimes.

11 We still haven’t recovered from the damage wrought by the Holocaust, let alone everything else Europeans have done to us over the centuries.

12 Anti-Semitism is and remains a pervasive part of all white-majority societies, along with any society touched by European colonialism.

13 So the ‘white-European’ identity today carries all sorts of negative connotations as a result.

14 And from there I proceed to my main thesis, which is that how people identify Jews – especially Ashkenazi Jews – really matters.

14 Identifying Ashkenazi Jews as white-Europeans creates many problems and ultimately leads to a misdiagnosis of who we are, our reality, and our lived experience.

15 There are 8 reasons why Ashkenazim should never be identified as white/European, and why other Ashkenazim need to stop identifying themselves as such.

15 It erases Ashkenazi Jews who are visibly of color

16 You, individually, might be white-passing. You might know other Ashkenazim who are white-passing, and this may lead you to the conclusion that your experience is normative.

16 But it’s not.

17 There are countless Ashkenazim who are visibly Middle Eastern. And I don’t mean Ashkenazim who have a Sephardi or Mizrahi grandparent or two. I mean full, 100% Ashkenazi Jews whose grandparents and great-grandparents all hail from the ‘Pale of Settlement’ across Eastern Europe.

17 That is because we are a Middle Eastern diaspora population, indigenous to the southern Levant. Ergo, there are many of us who – unsurprisingly – look the part.

18 Someone like Oded Fehr, or Idan Raichel, or Jeff Goldblum, or Sacha Baron Cohen, or 70-80% of the people in this gallery (which is fairly representative of what full Ashkenazi Jews tend to look like) will NEVER be white. No matter how hard they try to be.

18 Even if they were to accept the delusion that Ashkenazi Jews are not Middle Eastern, they will never be able to walk through society as anything BUT Middle Eastern.

19 So by identifying Ashkenazim as “white Jews” or “Euro ethnics”, you are (perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not) erasing their existence and reality.

19 The notion that Ashkenazi Jews are some overwhelmingly Swedish-looking collective of Orientalist “Europeans” LARPing as Levantines is an anti-Semitic myth – no different from the lie that we killed Jesus and kidnapped white babies to bake matzah.

20 In truth, the phenotypic gulf between Ashkenazi Jews and other populations of the Levant (particularly Samaritans and Lebanese Christians) is minimal to non-existent. So if you wouldn’t call non-Jewish Levantines white, you shouldn’t be calling Ashkenazim white either.

20 Some of us, due to our light complexion, may pass for white/European (the same way light-skinned Amazigh, Arabs, Turks, Samaritans, Iranians, Kurds, Afghanis, Pakistanis, and Indians may also pass for white/European), but we are a totally separate entity and you have 2,000 years of white-European racism against Ashkenazi Jews as proof of that.

21 It erases our Middle Eastern origin, culture, and heritage

21 Ashkenazi Jews are a Levantine diaspora population, indigenous to the land of Israel.

22 That is where our ethnic identity, core culture, and civilization were born, and the traditions we carried with us in exile all either originate in that land or center on our ethnic and cultural ties to it, as well as our yearning to return home.

22 And those traditions that were robbed from us or which we were unable to preserve in exile (e.g. turbans, robes, hummus, pitas, hamsas, certain forms of art, jewelry, carpets, pottery, and music) are still rightfully ours, and we have every right to return to and reclaim them. Ashkenazim who partake in these customs are not “appropriating” anything. They are simply indigenous Levantines remembering and re-embracing their native traditions. In other words, they are decolonizing. That is a GOOD thing.

23 We are a Middle Eastern people. A historically exiled and colonized Middle Eastern people, but a Middle Eastern people nonetheless.

23 We are not part of European civilization, and we never were. As ethnic Jews, we already have a civilizational identity of our own – and it’s Levantine.

24 Individual Ashkenazim (and other non-European immigrants to Europe) may have contributed to European culture and society at various points, but that’s obviously not the same thing. For example, none would argue that black Africans in Europe are “ackshually white-Europeans”/”no longer African” – or that African civilization is “no longer their own” – because Andre Dumas penned the Three Musketeers or because his father, Alexandre Dumas, was an important French general.

24 We also do not share their history of conquest, colonization, genocide, and white supremacism, nor are we beneficiaries thereof. On the contrary, we’ve been continuous victims of these things for more than 2000 years.

25 The idea that Ashkenazi Jews should be thought of as white people/ethnic Europeans is fundamentally oppressive, and essentially tantamount to whitewashing and cultural erasure. It is colonization of our identity.

25 On the subject of culture, many have argued that we’re not Middle Eastern anymore because our diaspora culture (‘diaspora’ being the key word here) is European-influenced, and because it’s “too different” from Arab, Sephardic, and Mizrahi culture. These are actual arguments that I’ve heard. From other Zionists, no less. And they are complete nonsense.

26 For one, as mentioned previously, only our diaspora culture is significantly European-influenced. Our root culture (i.e. pre-diaspora Jewish culture), which is still rightfully ours, is Middle Eastern. Diaspora is only one slice of our history and heritage. It doesn’t define us as a whole.

26 Furthermore, “European-influenced” does not mean “not Middle Eastern”. Although Ashkenazi diaspora culture was clearly impacted and filtered somewhat by exile to an alien climate, it is still Middle Eastern at its core.

27 Second, many non-European cultures – especially those impacted by European colonialism (like ours was) – have European influences. For example, African-Americans are very Westernized in terms of culture, and most have no memory of where in Africa their ancestors came from as all records were destroyed by white slavers. Yet no one would ever deny them the right to identify as 100% African. Nor should they. Why should it be any different for us?

27 Ashkenazim identifying as Middle Eastern does not erase our history of exile in Europe. All it does is recognize exile and diaspora for what they are: exile and diaspora. It acknowledges our indigenous Middle Eastern ethnic origins and puts them front and center, as is our right. Non-Ashkenazim (and non-Jews) who are so concerned about us “silencing our own history in Europe” should take a seat. We are the ones who decide how we identify and talk about our history. No one else gets to do that. Only we do.

28 Third, there isn’t one “pure” Middle Eastern culture shared by everybody in the region (except us, apparently). There’s always been European influence, especially in the Levant.

28 Fourth, using Mizrahi, Sephardi, Arab, or Persian culture as some kind of yardstick falsely presents the latter groups as standard-bearers of Middle Eastern culture – a sort of litmus test by which all others should be measured. It also acts as though Mizrahim and Sephardim were not themselves influenced by foreign cultures (especially southern Europeans, Arabs, and Persians). Lastly, it betrays an Arab-normative view of the Middle East which fails to account for the diversity of the region.

29 It is a given that our root culture – let alone our diaspora culture – will be different from Arab culture, and that is because we’re not Arabs. We never were. We are Jews – a Levantine people whose homeland is thousands of miles away from the Arabian Gulf.

29 Not all Middle Eastern cultures are the same. For example, Kurds and Saudis are both Middle Eastern peoples, but they have very little in common with each other.

30 That we were exiled into Europe and acquired ancient Greek/Italian admixture (which is still less than half of our overall genome) in the process does not make us white-Europeans either. There are plenty of non-white/non-European populations that carry European admixture, and for the same reasons we do: European colonialism.

30 African-Americans have significant European (primarily English and French) ancestry, as do many Native American tribes. South Americans are mixed with Spanish, Portuguese, and possibly French and Italian as well. Non-Jewish Levantines carry Greek and Roman ancestry (albeit not quite as much as we do), in addition to English, Germanic, and French (from the Crusaders). Turks have significant Greek, Roman, and East European ancestry.

31 And yes, many people from these same populations could easily pass as white: Helen Thomas (Lebanese), Ralph Nader (Lebanese), Rami Malek (Egyptian Copt), Justin Amash (Palestinian), Bashar Assad (Syrian), Ahed Tamimi (Palestinian), Linda Sarsour (Palestinian).

31 That’s without getting into the vast numbers of Samaritans, Iranians, Afghans, Berbers and others who can pass as white, despite these populations having very little, if any, European admixture.

32 None of this makes them white, and I imagine very few people would argue that it does. But in our case, these things are used as insurmountable “proof” that we are “white” and thus “foreign” to the Middle East.

32 Terms like “white Jews”/”European Jews” are tossed around regularly (and inaccurately) to suggest that we are not ethnically “pure” enough to be linked to our own ancestors.

33 It’s a horrifying and transparently anti-Semitic double standard aimed at disenfranchising us from our own heritage and erasing our ethnic Levantine identity. It is, as mentioned above, a colonization of our identity.

33 And when we allow this to happen, we allow ourselves to be deemed “appropriators” when we partake in Middle Eastern traditions (even including those that are, in fact, rightfully ours), accused of “whitewashing” if we land non-Jewish Middle Eastern roles (see: the half-Ashkenazi Jake Gyllenhaal as ‘Prince of Persia’), and even mocked for identifying as Jews at all (the notion that Ashkenazim are “fake Jews” being a well-worn trope).

34 At this point, I won’t be surprised if Ashkenazi Jewish actors are accused of “whitewashing” if they ever land a role as, say… King David, or Jesus, or even Moses. Is that what we want to happen?

34 If not, then we need to let the world know that we are Middle Eastern. We may have lived among Europeans for a time (and even contributed to their society at times), but we are not them. And they are not us.

35 It enables the argument that we don’t “belong” in Israel

35 The implication of saying we’re white goes far beyond forcing us to account for the legacy of European colonialism, which is not ours.

36 The minute we classify as white, we allow ourselves to be seen and treated as foreign colonizers in the Middle East. Ashkenazi Jews who identify as “white Europeans”, and refuse to own their Middle Eastern identity, are opening *themselves* up to delegitimization.

36 Arguments about Israel’s Mizrahi majority can only take you so far. We can’t keep using Sephardim and Mizrahim as shields. We need to own who we are, and to tell the Palestinian (and the Lebanese, and the Syrian, and the Mizrahi, and the Sephardi) that we are every bit as indigenous to the region as they are. Not one iota less.

37 Exile in Europe and colonization did not transform us into Europeans. We are still ethnic Jews, and therefore still Levantine. We should not be deprived of our indigenous Middle Eastern ethnic identity – and the rights entailed therein – for the fact that we were taken away from our homeland against our will. To argue that is to argue we should be punished further for the crimes that were committed against us, and is a crass exercise in victim-blaming.

37 So long as we keep thinking of ourselves as white, the Palestinian Arab will have every right to look at us as colonizers. Remember, it’s not our skin color that necessarily bothers the Palestinian – for there are plenty of Palestinians who are quite white-skinned themselves (Linda Sarsour, Ahed Tamimi) – it’s the connotation that comes with it.

38 So if they see us as white, it’s not our skin tone, it’s the connotation of being “white Europeans” and therefore unwelcome colonizers in the Middle East. That’s the narrative we all need to change, and change right now.

38 It encourages progressives to ignore anti-Semitism

39 When we identify as white, we deny our own marginalization and victimization under white supremacy and shut ourselves out of the conversation on race, which absolutely does pertain to and affect us. We deprive ourselves of the resources and solidarity we need to combat anti-Jewish racism while giving progressives (including the countless anti-Semites that have infiltrated the left) a license to ignore us completely and shout us down when issues of anti-Semitism arise. Because if we're really a group of privileged "white" people (as many have claimed), why would they care at all what we have to say?

39 They won't.

40 Because we're allowing them to see us as just another group of "whites" crying about their "privilege" and presenting themselves as the victims, just as "non-Jewish whites" always do. We are giving them permission to gaslight us into silence. Is that what you want?

40 Make no mistake, the insistence that we are "white" is why progressives refuse to take anti-Semitism seriously. They don't see us as "genuine" ethnic minorities, but instead as "white people with funny hats and lots of money". If we want that to change, we must shed this false consciousness we've developed about ourselves.

41 We are not white people and our "whiteness" is entirely illusory, designed to keep us complacent, oblivious and, above all, useful – just like the court Jews of old.

41 It perpetuates anti-Semitism in the mainstream and facilitates its growth

42 For a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this subject, it's important to look at the mainstream media – as well as the media consuming public – and analyze its attitude towards Jews, Jewish culture, and Jewish representation.

42 The American media tends to infantilize most peoples of color (a problem in its own right, but outside the scope of this article). But not Jews. We are instead treated as court jesters or as stand-ins/substitutes for white people. I imagine this is why they are so invested in calling us "white". They get to have all of the joys of bashing white people, but the wounds appear on OUR bodies, not theirs – thereby keeping the existing power structure intact (i.e. white people on top, and Jews at or near the very bottom) while maintaining the pretense of challenging it.

43 It also means they can make us completely invisible whenever they want, either by treating us as a subcategory of "white-European" (which we're not) or by ignoring us all together. After all, "white" people don't need extra representation, and they don't need protection or any other special considerations. This means we are the only non-white group whose mockery and vilification is seen as acceptable – even progressive.

43 All the while, we're expected to suffer in silence. Because Jews complaining about this treatment is nothing more than "white tears", of course.

44 We're not only cast as "white" people, but as SUPER "white" people. The whitest of the whites. We're being set up to take all of the blows on white society's behalf, while the justice and equality we still seek (as a minority group) eludes us.

44 And what better way to vilify us – to silence us and ensure we have no power nor any say or agency in the way we are treated – than to forcibly situate us in the bete noire of the day: whites.

45 The parallels with past anti-Semitic epochs could not be more striking.

45 In medieval Europe, it was non-Christians. In Muslim lands, it was non-Muslims. In Enlightenment Europe, it was religious institutions and “barbaric” non-Westerners. In the 19th and 20th century, it was non-whites. Today, it is white people.

46 In medieval Europe, we were the non-Christian bete noire, in league with Satan himself. In Islamic lands, we were the very same non-Muslims who rejected Muhammad. In Enlightenment Europe, we were that backward Asiatic people who opposed progress and were incapable of grasping science. In the 20th century, we were the non-white race polluting Western society and undermining its very foundations.

46 Today, we are “white” people. Not only “white” people, but the most “privileged” “white” people of them all. The ultimate beneficiaries of “white privilege”, if not the ones “in charge” of it all and the brains behind the entire system (see: anything written by Nation of Islam).

47 No matter the circumstances or the time period, we are constantly cast as the epitome of all that is bad. And today is clearly no different.

47 The only way to circumvent this fate is to tackle anti-Semitism and show the progressive that we’re not white either, and that we are marginalized as well. By calling us “white”, they are upholding the very forces that seek to keep us in a permanent state of subordination.

48 And by calling ourselves white, we perpetuate our own subordination.

48 It ignores our marginalization under white supremacy

49 The belief that Ashkenazi Jews have “white privilege” is a popular one, but nevertheless false. We were never accepted as white throughout history. The entire concept of “Jewish whiteness” is, in fact, very recent – and in today’s climate, perpetuated primarily by anti-Semites.

49 There are many who will quickly (and justifiably) point out that most Jews don’t have to worry about deadly encounters with police, or being followed around in stores, or the school-to-prison pipeline.

50 This is absolutely true.

50 It is also true for East Asians, South Asians, Arabs, and just about anyone who isn’t black, Hispanic, or Native American.

51 But here’s what we do have to worry about…

51 * Airport profiling and detainment

52 * Institutional and public scapegoating

52 * Orientalism and conspiracy theories

53 * White supremacist and racist violence

53 * Under-representation and typecasting in media

54 * Biased criminal justice system and other institutions, especially universities

54 * Cultural marginalization in general

55 * The very real and present fear that this country may one day become inhospitable to us, forcing us to flee

55 * Being one of the most hated ethnic groups *on Earth*, not just in America

56 Does that sound like white privilege to you?

56 It incentivizes division and bigotry

57 Ashkenazi Jews are victims of European colonialism. In fact, we’ve suffered under it incomparably longer and incomparably worse than just about anyone else.

57 And as is the norm with colonized populations, we’ve absorbed and internalized no shortage of self-shame. This has caused us to project self-hatred both inward and outward – towards ourselves, and towards our fellow Jews.

58 The worst of this can be seen in modern Israel’s early history. Men like David Ben-Gurion, despite seeing themselves as Middle Eastern (as Ashkenazim have every right to do), conversely sought to bring the re-established State of Israel closer – both in terms of culture and civilizational identity – to the West. And away from their own roots.

58 Many of Israel’s leaders at that time had colonized mindsets. They were overwhelmingly secular, socialist, and believed in the inherent “superiority” of Western civilization, especially vis a vis their own “backward” culture.

59 And they looked at Mizrahi Jews – who had recently been driven out of “Arab lands” – with disdain.

59 The Mizrahim were more conservative, more religious, more culturally “Arab” compared to Israel’s secular Ashkenazi leaders. And this led to discrimination. Mizrahi immigrants were sprayed with DDT, their babies kidnapped and given to Ashkenazi families, moved to the peripheries, given limited employment opportunities, and lived in poor conditions in ma’abarot.

60 Behavior such as this would never have been possible were it not for the subconscious, internalized shame that Israel’s Ashkenazi leaders felt towards their own Semitic-Middle Eastern identities, and their own idolization of the West. In light of all that, it hardly seems productive to take it a step further and thrust ourselves into a “white” identity. If anything, it only risks making things worse.

60 What happened should not be taken as “proof”, or even as evidence, that Ashkenazim are “not Middle Eastern”. It should be seen for what it is: internalized self-hatred borne of centuries of European oppression which warped the Ashkenazi self-view and, ultimately, their overall behavior and relationship with fellow Jews.

61 That is what European colonialism does to a people. Why else would so many American Jews go out of their way to straighten their noses, bleach their skin, straighten their hair, etc (as recounted by Philip Roth in his books)? Why else would skin bleaching creams be sold in African countries, of all places? Among many, many other examples.

61 Every non-white population that has been subjugated by European colonialism has internalized colorism, which privileges some groups over others. This doesn’t make the more “white-adjacent” members of that group white or European.

62 The more we internalize our identity as Middle Easterners, as people of color, the more we mitigate the risk of intra-Jewish discrimination and other nasty, unhealthy behaviors. It brings us that much closer to unity, and to the necessary understanding that we are one people with a common struggle (against white supremacism, and anti-Semitism in general) and a common enemy.

62 Is alienating ourselves from our co-ethnics really a good idea?

63 It ignores our own history

63 The main impetus for Zionism was our forced exile from Judea into Europe by European colonial powers, and our millennia-old yearning for justice. But more importantly than that, we knew we’d never be safe as minorities among the Europeans.

64 It was the Dreyfus Affair, one of the worst anti-Semitic episodes in Europe’s already blood-soaked history of Jew-hatred, that convinced Theodor Herzl – often considered the founding father of Zionism – that the Jews needed to leave diaspora behind and build a state of their own in their ancestral homeland. He knew that no amount of legal equality would be enough to convert the European heart, and understood that it would be more prudent to gather the exiles and return home rather than wait for a Messiah he knew would never come.

64 Europeans never accepted us as European, and we never considered ourselves Europeans either. It was widely known that Jews – irrespective of where we had been exiled to – are an Asian people. Even philo-Semites recognized it, marveling at the fact that we had survived in exile for so long despite the horrific treatment we endured.

65 As recently as the 20th century, America’s government sought to take what was already common knowledge and make it an official part of US law. They endeavored to move us, and other Middle Eastern ethnic groups (Syrians, Afghans, Armenians), into the Asian-American category – even in spite of the fact that most of us had arrived to the United States by way of Europe, rather than directly from Israel.

65 Although bigotry and xenophobia were their prime motivations, the US government understood then, perhaps better than we do now, that Europe was nothing more than diaspora for us (just as the United States is now) and that our true ethnic descent is from Israel. In the Middle East. American Jews knew this too.

66 But as this came at the height of America’s anti-Asian immigration policies, American Jews panicked. They knew they would lose their citizenship if they had been legally registered as Asian. And so Jews, and MENA-Americans more broadly, successfully sought to have all Middle Eastern and North African ethnic groups legally recognized as White.

66 People often liken the Jewish immigration experience in this country to Irish, Italians, and “non-WASP” European groups in general. But this is not accurate. The latter groups are European and were never considered to be anything else. Whereas Jews are, and always have been, a Middle Eastern ethnic group. Everybody knew this back then. And as much as historians (especially avowedly anti-Zionist ones like Karen Brodkin) and others may hate to admit it, our experiences bear more parallels with the Arab-American one than that of any Euro-American group.

67 The 1924 Immigration law was not much different, except that it admitted and barred people based on where you arrived from rather than your ethnicity/race. Many have interpreted this policy as the American government “recognizing” Ashkenazim as “European”/”European-American”, but this too is inaccurate.

67 What it meant was that people – irrespective of ethnicity and race – had a better chance of immigrating to the US if they carried a European passport, rather than an Asian one.

68 For example, an Arab born in Bulgaria had a better chance of gaining admission to the US than an Ashkenazi born in Mandate Palestine (who had zero chance). And vice versa. Ashkenazim were still broadly recognized as Middle Eastern. Confusion arises from the fact that most Ashkenazim, at the time, were arriving from Eastern Europe and so did not face the restrictions that Ashkenazim immigrating from Palestine would have.

68 Even the apartheid government of South Africa, which classified Jews (and Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians, and even several Asian populations) as conditionally “White”, did not consider us European and (supposedly) weren’t planning on classifying us as “White” at all.

69 This brings us to the Holocaust, or what could be considered the culmination of 2000 years of Orientalist European Jew-hate. Although Hitler’s conviction that Jews were an Asiatic people “tainting” the European race was hardly new, he was the first (and hopefully the last) to successfully act on it in such a horrific and barbaric way. His actions led to the genocide of more than ? of our entire people.

69 To call ourselves white or European is to pretend that this history never happened. Or worse, to internalize and project the idea that it was *our fault* these horrible things happened to us in the first place – that we didn’t try hard enough to assimilate, that we didn’t distance ourselves and suppress our Jewishness enough, that we clung too hard to our traditions and didn’t do enough plastic surgery, that we insisted on being Jews instead of making ourselves invisible as we “should have done”, etc.

70 Ironically, now we’re being rejected by other Middle Easterners, and Ashkenazim in Israel are widely seen as less legitimate, less authentic and, in the context of maleness, less of a man. We are expected to suppress our own Ashkenazi-ness (i.e. we can’t look Ashkenazi, we can’t act Ashkenazi, etc) if we want to be seen as equally indigenous and legitimate.

70 Is that the attitude you wish to perpetuate?

71 Conclusion

71 We have absolutely nothing to gain from identifying as White or European, and everything to lose. No amount of artificial daylight between ourselves and our Middle Eastern identity is going to change the way white supremacists feel about us. If identifying as white hasn't convinced them to stop hating us yet, it's because it never will.

72 Our lives can only improve from fully owning our Middle Eastern ethnic identity.

72 We must own who we are. We are ethnic Jews. This means we are Middle Eastern. We are part of an ethnic group and civilization that is indigenous to the Levant and older than most civilizations on Earth. There is absolutely nothing to be afraid or ashamed of. It's simply what we are.

73 People too often forget that 'Ashkenazi' is simply a diaspora identity/minhag, denoting our migration patterns post exile. It is tertiary to who we are. Our primary ethnic identity is Jewish. That is Middle Eastern. And that is why we are called 'diaspora' Jews everywhere except Israel. Because we're Levantine.

73 If Ashkenazi Jews are indigenous to Israel (and we are), then of course we're Middle Eastern. This is common sense.

74 And it's about time we started owning that.

74 On The Difference Between Diaspora History And Roots/Descent

75 Please note that the posts on The Blogs are contributed by third parties. The opinions, facts and any media content in them are presented solely by the authors, and neither The Times of Israel nor its partners assume any responsibility for them. Please contact us in case of abuse. In case of abuse,

75 "Roots" does not mean what this book's author seems to thinks it does. Source: Wikimedia Commons

76 Amidst the ongoing Russian occupation of Ukraine, many Jews with diaspora history in Ukraine have taken to social media to discuss their family "roots" there. Among these voices were celebrities such as Matisyahu and Mila Kunis, the latter of whom was born in Ukraine and fled the country in large part due to antisemitic racism.

76 Many of these Jewish supporters of Ukraine have described themselves as "people of Ukrainian descent", have spoken of Ukrainians as their "kinsmen", and described Ukraine's history and heritage as their own. They consider the situation in Ukraine "personal" for this very reason.

77 What is missing in all of this is the fact that diaspora history and descent are two completely different things, and the insistence of assimilationist-minded Jews in conflating these concepts has been nothing if not a boon for today's generation of antisemites who see the key to our continued subordination in delegitimizing Jewishness as a distinct ethnic group and, by extension, our rights in Israel – our indigenous homeland.

78 It does nothing to help us. All it does, in reality, is buttress anti-Zionist arguments while enabling the sort of grotesque, twisted Holocaust inversion and distortion we see in this tweet…

79 This is goysplaining of the worst sort. Absolutely unacceptable.

80 As a Jewish-American whose diaspora history (at least part of it) also took place in Ukraine, I feel I need to speak up.

81 What Is Diaspora History?

82 Diaspora is when a population departs – either by volition or force – from its indigenous homeland and sojourns in another part of the globe. These external territories are known as ‘diaspora countries’ or ‘host countries’. Diaspora status is generally marked by hyphenated conjunctions, e.g. Chinese-American, African-American, and so on. The country or region of ethnic origin comes first and the country of residence comes second.

83 But when does a diaspora cease to be a “diaspora”? In other words, when does a Korean-Italian (i.e. an ethnic Korean of Italian residence/nationality) cease to be Korean and become simply “Italian”? How long does one need to live outside of their indigenous homeland before they cease to be indigenous to it? Where is the cut-off point?

84 The answer is simple: there isn’t one.

85 Indigeneity does not expire by dint of how long one has been “away” from their country of origin. The only way that can happen is if the individual or population living in diaspora is completely absorbed into the native host majority. In most cases, this process occurs over a span of at least 2-3 generations, although it can vary depending on circumstances and pre-existing proximity between the diaspora population and the host.

86 Jews, despite their long (forced) sojourn outside of the Levant, were never absorbed into the host populations of the lands they found themselves in. Jews who lived or still live in Europe remain, to this day, ethnically distinct from their host majorities. Our identity as Jews, as a Levantine population, has remained and still remains fully intact. We were never absorbed by Germans, Russians, Poles or, more pertinently, Ukrainians. If we had been, we would not be here today as Jews, and these conversations would not be happening.

87 Diaspora history, therefore, relates to the period of our sojourn in foreign lands – outside of our native territory.

88 What Is Descent?

89 Descent, on the other hand, relates to ethnic origins, i.e. their place of ethnogenesis. If a population’s ethnogenesis occurred in Europe, they are of European descent. If their ethnogenesis took place in Africa, they are of African descent.

90 The ethnogenesis of the Jewish people took place in the Middle East – in the land of Israel. Therefore, ethnic Jews (i.e. all Jews, barring recent converts to Judaism) are, without exception, people of Middle Eastern/West Asian descent. This is why Jewish migration to Israel is referred to as “aliyah” or “ascent”. We descended from people who originated in the land of Israel, and we can now ascend, or go back to our homeland.

91 All too often, we see the term “descent” being used as a shorthand for “my family recently lived in that place”. But that is not what descent means. Descent means ethnic origins.

92 The reason we see this conflation so often is because most diasporas arrived to their current countries of residence directly via their country of origin. As a result, “ethnic origins” and “the place my family recently lived in” are, from the perspective of these groups, one and the same.

93 But the same does NOT hold true for the majority of Jews outside of Israel. Jewish-Americans, barring a couple hundred thousand who immigrated here directly from Israel, did not arrive to these shores from their “countries of origin”. Rather, they hopped from one diaspora land (e.g. Ukraine, Poland, Iraq, etc) to another (America). But because our experience is so unusual in this respect (and for reasons of political antisemitism, assimilationist aspirations, and Holocaust trauma), most people tend to conflate our recent diaspora history with our family roots. This is inaccurate and needs to stop.

94 Sympathizing with Ukraine and honoring our history there is one thing. Acting as though Ukrainians are our “kin” and that their history is our history is another.

95 We do not share Ukraine’s ethnic origins, history, language, national heroes, folklore, customs, cuisine. On the contrary, we have our own history, our own ethnic identity, our own folklore, our own cuisine, language, customs, and so on. I’m not talking about diaspora-based adaptations (e.g. Yiddish), but about our actual root culture: the one born and forged in Israel itself. Diaspora cultures can be seen as branches of our ancestral tree and we do share traditions such as. Each branch is still connected to our ancestral tree, and we mutually share the traditions of our indigenous homeland (i.e. the tree).

96 Our ethnic background is Levantine/West Asian. Not Ukrainian. Not Polish. Not German. Etc. The length of our exile does not mitigate the validity and relevance of that background one iota.

97 Ultimately, what we see here is stubborn maintenance of the 19th century Bundist dream of liberation through assimilation, i.e. that if we eliminate the aspects of Jewishness that are most bothersome to gentiles (namely, our identity as a distinct nation and ethnic group) and distort our identity into a religious one, acting as though we are nothing more than religious subsets of our former hosts (i.e. “just Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, etc who just happen to practice the Jewish religion”), we will be safe. However, this is a distortion of our reality, our experience, and our identity. It is assimilation. It is colonization.

98 This is not to say that a Jew who lives in Ukraine or has citizenship/residence there can’t identify with or care about it, or become acculturated into the host society.

99 Just that we should acknowledge Ukraine as diaspora and acknowledge that we are of Levantine, not Ukrainian, descent. Sadiq Khan, for example, is a proud acculturated Brit, but that does not mean he’s Anglo-Saxon. His roots are still in the Indian subcontinent. And ours are still in the Levant.

100 Part of my diaspora history took place in Ukraine. I am not Ukrainian. I am not of Ukrainian descent. My family roots are not in Ukraine.

101 I am a Jew. I am of Levantine descent, and my family roots are in Judea.

102 ABOUT THE AUTHOR Half-Irish/half-Jewish American activist, musician, and writer.